

1 Samuel 16:1-13
Psalm 23
Ephesians 5:8-14
John 9: 1-25

Sermon for 3/19/23

I ONCE WAS BLIND
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: Only God knows the heart.

The ninth chapter of John's gospel is really one of a kind, because the entire chapter is devoted to giving us the various chapters of the story of one particular miracle Jesus performed, that of healing a blind man. We're given a little background to the miracle, and then the miracle itself, and then a couple of episodes stretching over the following days that in addition to the blind man involve his parents and those misguided Pharisees that John uses so often as foils to explore the deep meaning of both the things Jesus did and the things he said. The lectionary actually asks us to read the whole chapter, all 41 verses, but we'll limit ourselves to just the first half today. (Incidentally, I think we spent about a month and a half on this chapter in our BS of John's gospel last year). Anyway, we're just going to read and think about verses in the first half or so of the chapter.

Read John 9: 1-25.

The account begins with his disciples posing what sounds to us like a curious question to Jesus. They come across a man who must have been a familiar figure to them because they already know that he's been blind from birth, and they ask Jesus whether he himself was a sinner or whether it was his parents.

The disciples here are demonstrating that they share the common view prevalent among the Jews of the time that physical ailments are due to some moral failure, which they call sin. Unhappy circumstances in life, according to this way of thinking, up to and including injury and disease are to be understood as punishments meted out by God for some moral failings or misbehaviors.

This was the universally accepted way of thinking among the Jews and their religious leaders at the time, and for good reason, since you can see it reflected throughout the Old Testament. The book of Job, for example is one long meditation on this way of thinking, and there are many other examples as well. So given that way of thinking, the explanation for the blindness of this man must be some sort of moral fault of his. But if that's so, then the case of a man presents an obvious problem. If he was blind from birth, how could his blindness be due to some sinfulness, since he'd never had the opportunity to sin?

The Jews had two ways of dealing with this sort of case. The first, which some believed, was that there could be such a thing as prenatal sin: somehow even the fetus in the womb was able to violate one or more of God's ordinances, and the blindness at birth would have been the punishment for those violations.

The second was much more widely held among the Jews, and that was that the punishment had been inflicted on the baby for the sinfulness of the baby's parents. And you can in fact find a good deal of this way of thinking in the Old Testament as well: The sins of the fathers are visited unto the children in a common way of thinking in tribal cultures even to this day, and finds some echoes in cultures such as our own, which the political powers that be are attempting to retribalize, to hold distant descendants responsible for the sins of their ancestors.

But that's a subject for a different message. Today we're simply mentioning it to make sense of the question his disciples ask Jesus at the outset: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind."

And Jesus immediately dismisses those suggestions, and along with them the whole way of thinking that they represent: the view that there is some necessary connection between bodily infirmities and the moral condition of the soul. But Jesus is obviously concerned with much more than simply correcting an erroneous explanation for disease and physical disability. John reminds us over and over again in his gospel that the miracles of Jesus are to be regarded as signs, as signs pointing to something much deeper, something involved with the whole purpose of his ministry as God among us.

In this case, the physical blindness he cures is meant to lead us in thinking about our own spiritual blindness, and Jesus himself indicates that in his response to the disciples asking him, when he says:

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

My suggestion is that the spiritual blindness that Jesus is concerned with, here and always, is the blindness that sees human failing and misfortune, whether physical or moral, as meriting God's punishment.

In the case of physical debilities, whether it's being blind, or being short, or developing brain cancer, that just seems to us obviously true, doesn't it? Largely because of the influence of two thousand years of the Christian way of thinking about God, we can't even fathom a worldview like those ancient Jews had, and that many other cultures and religions to this day have, that these kinds of things are God's punishment for the condition of our moral life.

But can we say the same when we think about that moral life itself? Don't we think that things like greed, deceitfulness, arrogance, cruelty, violence, selfishness and pride deserve punishment?

That has certainly been the way of thinking of our moral philosophies, and even of our Christian religion, for most of its existence. What is hell, after all, but the place where God punishes the greedy, the haughty, the violent, the rapacious, the lustful, selfish, and the unrepentant proud.

Here's the way that we tend to think of people, both in our ordinary reflection and in our Christian faith, when we are considering their character, and thinking about how to blame them, or to praise them, for that matter.

Suppose we think somebody is proud and selfish and inconsiderate and ungenerous. The thought we have, whether we have it consciously or not, is that there is somehow someone, so to say, behind all those qualities, who has somehow chosen those qualities to be elements of his or her personality. That's why we feel at liberty, not only to recognize those qualities, but also to blame the person for them, to hold that person responsible. And that's also why, if we find those qualities objectionable or perhaps even reprehensible, we feel that the punishment of the person would be deserved. Perhaps even the punishment by God. Perhaps even the punishment by God of eternal torment in the fires of hell. That's why we stand and cheer when the bad guy gets his comeuppance at the end of the movie.

Does that sound harsh? Well, when you put it that bluntly, it does. But I can pretty much assure you that that point of view is one which you would find represented, either bluntly or with a little more circumspection, in pretty much every church in Orleans County this morning, except this one.

And that's not to knock other churches, it's just to say that it's pretty much the orthodox way of thinking about God and human sin throughout most of Christian history.

But I don't think it's Christ's way. I think what Jesus is teaching is that, as physical infirmities are to the physical body, so moral infirmities are to the soul. And that's why Jesus is not the great punisher of souls, but the great physician of souls.

The spiritual blindness Jesus offers to cure is the blindness that believes it can judge the quality of the innermost soul – that in us which was created in the image of God – by the qualities of the personality that soul has acquired as its clothing over the years from the circumstances of its life.

Moral judgmentalism in that sense, the judgmentalism that seeks to rate the divine quality of the child of God within each of us by the personalities that have been cobbled together from life's circumstances and serve to cloak that child of God, that moral judgmentalism is itself perhaps the most terrible because it is the most subtle form of pride.

Judge not, lest ye be judged, is the short formula Jesus uses to sum up his instruction on the Sermon on the Mount.

We are invited and encouraged to do all we can to change the world for the better. We are invited and encouraged to deal in a loving Christian fashion with those whose lives have clearly gone materially and spiritually astray. We are even prepared to accept that there are some problems that cannot be solved by earthly means, that cannot be reformed this side of heaven, certainly not by any efforts of our own.

But we are forbidden by Christ's own sacred instruction, from judging the divine quality of the innermost soul of others. That habit, or tendency, or temptation in ourselves, is a soul disease every bit as malignant as those we, in its exercise, condemn in others.

And our prayer to conclude this message follows naturally from that realization. We pray, heavenly father, to be healed from the awful soul disease that seeks to put ourselves in your place as the judge of the souls of others, that presumes to condemn what it doesn't comprehend. We know that we cannot heal ourselves of

this spiritual cancer, so we pray for the mercy and ministration of your Son, our Lord and Divine physician, Jesus Christ, and we make this prayer in his name.